

8 May 1972

NSC BRIEFING

I. Mr. President, this briefing is promised on the assumption that North Vietnam's seaborne imports are shut off by an effective interdiction program. Taking that assumption as a "given", I shall attempt a checklist outline of the impact such an interdiction of seaborne imports would be likely to have on what might be termed both sides of the ledger.

II. The Probable Minuses

A. Over 90 percent of North Vietnam's ~~3.5~~^{2.5} million tons of 1971 imports came by sea, and about 90 percent of North Vietnam's seaborne imports came through the Port of Haiphong. But those figures mask another logistic equation at least equally germane. North Vietnam's total overland and seaborne imports for the past year averaged about 6,800 tons per day. The confirmed capacity of the overland--railroad, road and river--routes from China totals 16,000 tons per day.

during the October through May dry season and 13,000 tons per day during the June through September wet season.

B. I realize the program to be discussed this morning envisages sustained aerial interdiction against the overland routes from China along with a total interdiction of seaborne imports. But three sets of facts merit consideration in this context.

1. The 9,000 tons per day capacity of the rail net from China is 30 percent greater than the 6,800 ton daily level of North Vietnam's total 1971 imports and even the 13,000 ton wet season daily capacity of the total overland route structure is almost 100 percent greater than the daily level of 1971 imports. Interdiction, consequently, would have to shrink the throughput capacity of the overland net by more than 50 percent before that net was rendered physically incapable of carrying North Vietnam's current level of total imports---and military supplies, at most, make up well under one third of that total.

2. North Vietnam has an estimated 180 locomotives and 2,500 to 3,000 freight cars. Chinese standard gauged freight cars can operate on the double gauged Dong Dang line which extends to within seven miles of Hanoi and Chinese cars can operate on the alternate double gauged route to Hanoi via Kep and Thai Nguyen. The current North Vietnamese truck inventory of an estimated 18,000 to 23,000 vehicles is the largest it has ever been.
3. The Vietnamese Communists have an impressive performance record of logistic resourcefulness and ant-like tenacity in the face of formidable obstacles. They move heavy artillery and ammunition over roadless mountain jungle to assault Dien Bien Phu and we know that despite sustained aerial interdiction they have moved tanks, POL, heavy artillery and ammunition down the whole length of the Ho Chi Minh trail for use in South Vietnam's Military Region 3.

C. The effective denial of seaborne imports would clearly confront Hanoi with major, and urgent logistical problems. The most pressing and serious problem would be the need to establish alternate ways of importing POL, virtually all of which now comes by sea. Hanoi's entire requirement--390,000 tons in 1971--could be met from China's production and transportation resources. If Soviet stocks were used, they would have to be shipped by rail across 2,500 odd miles of Chinese territory. Such a POL movement would require about 350 to 400 tank cars in regular operation, but this figure represents about one percent of China's 38,000 tank car inventory. The burden on China's rail system would be even less if Hanoi's new POL shipments were to originate at least in part from the major Chinese refineries at Shanghai and/or Lan-Chou.

1. On POL, a time factor would clearly come into play. Hanoi now has about 90 days POL supply (120,000 odd tons) at current

consumption levels, and consumption would obviously rise if trucks started shuttling to the rail heads. Given full Chinese cooperation, however, an interim alternate land flow sufficient to meet critical North Vietnamese needs could almost certainly be set up within this time frame.

- D. On the larger question of general stockpiles, the evidence is spongy but at a minimum current military supply stocks represent about 12 months resupply requirements. Whatever be the absolute, accurate figures, the essential point here is ^that Hanoi has several months of breathing room in which to take political stock, weigh the impact of the new US move and test the efficacy of alternate arrangements. And if these alternate arrangements proved out in practice the logistical equations I cited earlier, a denial of sea-borne imports would not necessarily render North Vietnam bereft of essential supplies over the medium to longer term.

E. In any event, the total denial of seaborne imports would be unlikely to have any short run logistical impact on the battlefields in South Vietnam. The supplies earmarked to support the Communists' current military offensive are already deployed in Laos, Cambodia or caches in South Vietnam.

1. Indeed, one of Hanoi's most likely immediate responses to the new US interdiction effort would be to step up the short run level of Communist military activity in South Vietnam.

F. In another sphere, it is not within my charter, Mr. President, to consider the domestic reaction to such an interdiction program within the United States. But this is a factor that would loom very large in Hanoi's calculations. It is also a factor that would be carefully considered in Moscow and Peking.

G. As for the Soviets, Moscow would almost certainly move to cancel the summit--perhaps not immediately, but probably within a week or so if we persisted in our new course of action.

1. We do not believe that the Kremlin's leaders consider Soviet stakes in Indochina worth the risk of a direct Russian military confrontation with US forces, but this restraint--even if operative--would not preclude the Soviet Union's exerting itself vigorously to help North Vietnam, even to the point of probing the limits of our tolerance with respect to Soviet minesweepers.
2. Whatever be their real private intentions, Soviet leaders would make propaganda noises intimating that many things articulate segments of US, and foreign, opinion consider far more important than Indochina had been placed in jeopardy--SALT, trade prospects, and detente in Europe.
3. Even if they took private care to minimize the risk of military confrontation, the world affords many potential pressure points, such as Berlin or Cuba where Moscow can remind Washington that great power muscle flexing is a game two can play.

H. Though the Chinese (with wry satisfaction) would probably see the US move as more directly challenging to the USSR than themselves, Peking would feel compelled to demonstrate--to Hanoi and the world--its continued devotion to the North Vietnamese cause and its outrage at the US action.

1. During the pre-1968 bombing, China sent up to 90,000 engineer, anti-aircraft artillery and support troops to North Vietnam to help Hanoi cope with its problems. In the new environment here postulated, some measure of similar support would probably be dispatched across the China border.
2. Some degree of chill would unquestionably arrest the burgeoning thaw in Sino-US relations.
3. Given the uncertain internal state of China's leadership, the postulated US action might cause severe problems for Chou En-lai and those who supported his policy changes symbolized by your Peking visit.

- I. The predominant reaction in the non-Communist world would be that the US move was an ill-advised escalation of a struggle which had ceased to be worth additional costs and risks. Hanoi would be counting on such a reaction and--with active help from Moscow and Peking--would do everything possible to fan it.
- II. As you will have recognized, Mr. President, all of my preceding remarks have been on one side of the ledger. This ledger, as do all others, of course has two sides.
- A. The logistic equations on which much of the negative argument rests are fairly simple. In concrete practice they could prove unrealistically simplistic. Whatever be the throughput capacity of the overland routes from China and even granting the often demonstrated logistic resourcefulness and tenacity of the North Vietnamese, the fact remains that to overcome the sudden loss of seaborne imports, Hanoi would have to make quick arrangements for the alternate servicing, by land, of ninety percent of its current imports--over two million tons per year. Despite any carefully drawn

contingency plans and even with full Soviet and Chinese support this would be--to put it more than mildly--an enormous administrative undertaking.

- B. We run relatively little risk in assuming that Hanoi can cope successfully with a logistic problem of these dimensions. The political fortunes and possibly the very lives of Hanoi's leaders would be riding on the accuracy of their estimate of their capabilities. Their fanaticism and dedication have been amply demonstrated over the years, but so too has been their hard headed prudence. What might look to us like an acceptable risk might look very ~~different~~ ^{different} difficult to those who would have to pay the price of failure.
- C. Hanoi could not possibly cope with the loss of seaborne imports without prompt, extensive cooperation and help from China and the Soviet Union. We assume such assistance in requisite quantities would be quickly forthcoming. So too, probably, do the North Vietnamese. But the new winds blowing in our

relations with Peking and Moscow have been profoundly disquieting to Hanoi. North Vietnam's leaders are acutely aware of the fact that once before--in 1954--Moscow (without any opposition from Peking) induced them into accepting a settlement they did not want and did not like. Also, Hanoi cannot be blind to the fact that if the Soviets or Chinese ever wanted to exert leverage, a time when Hanoi urgently needed major new forms of assistance would be an optimum moment to do so.

- D. If the stoppage of seaborne imports is anywhere near total and if, simultaneously, Hanoi's overland routes to China and its internal depots are under continuing attack, North Vietnam is clearly faced with logistics problems of a magnitude and dimension greater than any problems it has had to cope with before. If it persists in its hard line policy and fails to solve these problems, Hanoi runs a risk of total collapse and defeat.

- E. Our equations tell us these logistic problems are soluble. But they are certainly not soluble without enormous effort involving major reallocations, hence at least temporary dislocation, of resources, especially manpower. The North Vietnamese people are well disciplined and resilient. They have also already endured more than a decade of grinding war. The added new burdens they would have to quickly assume if their leaders are to cope with the postulated new situation would be burdens falling heavily on already tired shoulders.
- F. The postulated actions would force Hanoi's leaders to accept the unpalatable fact that any illusions they may have had about your hands being tied by domestic political pressures were exactly that--illusions. However much they might hope--or even calculate--that such actions would ensure your defeat in November, they would prudentially have to anticipate that at least for the next six months the lid was off. This would have

several important psychological and political repercussions, far from the least being the short shrift it would give to the line with which the Hanoi Politburo has been consoling its party cadre and its people: that the US was being forced out of the Indochina struggle. Furthermore, this sobering recognition of your discretionary latitude would come at a time when Hanoi already has its military resources extended, deployed and committed to a major offensive.

G. The postulated actions would unquestionably give a major lift to South Vietnamese morale and lay unarguably to rest any debilitating worry about our arranging private deals behind the GVN's back. No one can guarantee that this morale lift would turn the tide on the battlefields of South Vietnam. Nor, for that matter, is South Vietnam's military cause necessarily lost without such a US action. But the morale lift to South Vietnam's Army and people would certainly enhance their performance--and be profoundly depressing to many of their Communist opponents in the field.

H. The ultimate outcome of the Indochina struggle will be more influenced by what happens on the battlefields in South Vietnam over the next six months than what happens in Haiphong harbor. But the postulated course of US action could play an important role in either of two extreme battlefield outcomes.

1. If in response to this action Hanoi intensifies its short run military pressure in South Vietnam, collapses the ARVN and unravels the GVNs, we still have a bargaining chip--in the minefields and associated activity--that we do not now have for negotiation on such bilateral issues as our prisoners.
2. Whatever be their ~~Causal~~ connection, if in conjunction with our new action, the South Vietnamese Forces stand off their Communist opponents and keep them from making any appreciable improvement in their present position, you have a political ball game quite different from any

that has been played before. The claim that this is a drive inevitably paving the way to final victory with which Hanoi has exhorted its followers will fall resoundingly and embarrassingly flat in such a situation. This would give Hanoi major problems, but it would have other stresses even more profound. North Vietnam's last foray into major military campaigns--the 1968 Tet offensive with the follow-on surges in May, August, and February 1969--produced, in Vietnam itself, a net defeat from which it took the Communists four years to recover. They balanced their ledger then by arguing, privately and publicly, that the 1968-1969 offensives produced more than compensating politico-military gains abroad: a major shift in US policy toward progressive withdrawal, a suspension of the bombing and the defeat of Lyndon Johnson. If the offensive of 1972 produces a defeat in South Vietnam and, in the process, provokes, not only

a reintroduction of bombing but a closure of Haiphong, those who advocated this policy will be in a virtually untenable position vis-a-vis their peers and putative rivals on the Central Committee and Politburo. Le Duan was lucky to retain his position as Party First Secretary after Tet 1968 and its aftermath. Whether he and his followers could retain their party primacy in circumstances such as those just postulated is problematic at best. None of this means North Vietnam would bolt for the negotiating table. It does, however, open the door to new leadership, new policies, and a very different sense of priorities and strategy feasibilities in Hanoi.

III. Conclusion

Mr. President, the decisions on North Vietnam's military and political policy in Indochina will be made by the nine current members of the Lao Dong Politburo in Hanoi. To date, the Politburo

has always seemed to act as if it were convinced that its political staying power was greater than that of any given US administration. Closing off North Vietnam's seaborne imports would clearly be a major act the Politburo would have to ponder carefully, weighing the act's material consequences and its import as a political signal. Though it would unquestionably be impressed and discomfited, the Politburo's track record of past performance in adversity does not suggest that this act--of itself--would make Hanoi change course in any short time frame. Instead--particularly if it viewed events on southern battlefields as moving in an encouraging direction--the Politburo would almost certainly wait to see if it could weather the new situation. It would have to be convinced that the US Government in an election year could persist in such a course. It would want to see what physical support it would receive from the USSR and China, what counter-pressure the Soviets and Chinese could be induced to bring to bear on Washington and how effective these pressures might

prove to be. Hanoi would want to see how the physical steps taken to counter the interdiction's impact were likely to work out. Above all, Hanoi would want to see if it could not press on to battlefield and political success in South Vietnam. North Vietnam's subsequent course of policy action in the strategy and negotiating sphere will be determined by how the Politburo--not we or other outsiders--assess such factors as those we have here discussed.